



Les Carnets de l'ACoSt

Association for Coroplastic Studies

14 | 2016

Varia

The Study Collection of Figurative Terracottas in the Metropolitan Museum of Art: A Critical Review

Jaimee Uhlenbrock



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/acost/812>

DOI: 10.4000/acost.812

ISSN: 2431-8574

Publisher

ACoSt

Printed version

Date of publication: 5 March 2016

Electronic reference

Jaimee Uhlenbrock, « The Study Collection of Figurative Terracottas in the Metropolitan Museum of Art: A Critical Review », *Les Carnets de l'ACoSt* [Online], 14 | 2016, Online since 15 April 2016, connection on 23 September 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/acost/812> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/acost.812>

This text was automatically generated on 23 September 2020.



Les Carnets de l'ACoSt est mis à disposition selon les termes de la licence Creative Commons Attribution - Pas d'Utilisation Commerciale - Pas de Modification 4.0 International.

The Study Collection of Figurative Terracottas in the Metropolitan Museum of Art: A Critical Review

Jaimee Uhlenbrock

- 1 On April 20, 2007, a spectacular installation of classical art opened to the public at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. Much press was devoted to this event, and ever since then visitors have enjoyed examples of Hellenistic and Roman art displayed in a breathtaking space that rises two stories high and that is illuminated with both natural and artificial light. Incorporated into this newly-designed space is a mezzanine, whose primary purpose appears to be the display of the museum's Etruscan collection.
- 2 However, little visited, and critically lacking in signage, is a large section of the mezzanine to the left of the Etruscan Gallery that houses the bulk of the less-important objects in the museum's classical collection. These objects comprise the Greek and Roman Study Collection (fig. 1), Gallery 171, where large groups of objects in all media—many never before exhibited—are crowded together in cases lit by a combination of natural and/or artificial light.

Fig. 1. View into the Greek and Roman Study Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art.



The author.

- 3 For our purposes it is the more than 170 terracotta figurines, along with terracotta reliefs, protomes, antefixes, and plastic vases, that are of particular importance. Most are displayed along with vases and small-scale bronze and stone sculpture to illustrate themes that occasionally correspond to a general chronological sequence. The themes, such as Heads in Classical Art, Votive Offerings, Women and Children in Classical Art, Animals, and so forth, seem more of an organizational device than an educational one. Even though one is happy to see such a large and eclectic assortment of mostly Greek terracottas, with some Etruscan, Roman, and Cypriote examples in the mix, disappointing is the absence of any text in the cases that might better orient the visitor.
- 4 Most of the terracottas in the Greek and Roman Study Collection belong to the late Classical and Hellenistic periods, and indeed one of the cases is simply named Hellenistic Terracottas (fig. 2). Here the viewer can find 116 Hellenistic figurines that remind us of the great drive to collect examples of this genre of Greek art that characterized connoisseurship and collecting in the early years of the 20th century, the period that saw the largest number of classical figurative terracottas coming to the museum.

Fig. 2. A case labeled Hellenistic Terracottas.

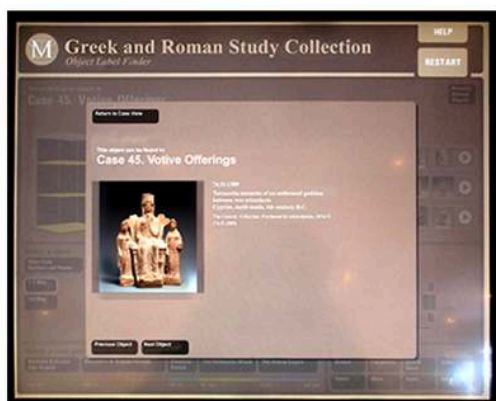
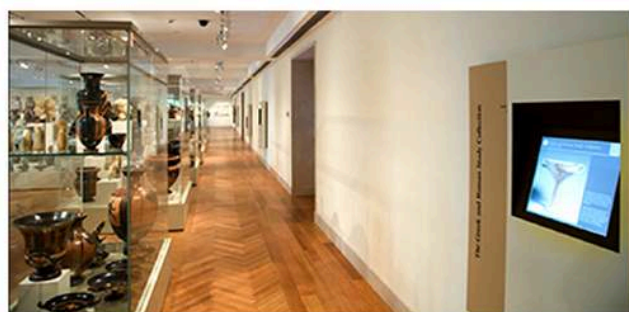


The author.

- 5 In certain respects, the Study Collection is an extremely useful tool since most of the objects in the museum's collection are no longer languishing in storerooms, but rather are accessible for study and reflection. Wall kiosks fitted with interactive touch screens (fig. 3) allow the visitor to choose a particular vitrine from a 3-dimensional map of the layout of the cases. Then the viewer is presented with a series of thumbnail images representing the objects in that particular case. When touching a particular thumbnail image the visitor sees a new screen with an enlarged image of that object accompanied by the object's name, date, credit line and accession number (fig. 4). No other information is provided, although the Greek and Roman Department of the museum will be updating and expanding the information on individual works in the collection. For the uninformed visitor, the need to go back and forth from a vitrine to the wall kiosk to know something about particular figurines may be tiring, if not frustrating, and visitors have been seen standing in front of a kiosk going through numbers of images without once looking at any one of the actual objects that these images represent.

Fig. 3. View of the wall in the Greek and Roman Study Collection with the interactive touch screens.

Fig. 4. An interactive touch screen.



The author.

- 6 The serious researcher can question the value of having direct access to several hundred figurative terracottas of the classical world that are completely devoid of archaeological context, a situation that characterizes most museum collections. It is obvious that such material cannot be the basis for the establishment of provenience or chronology. Yet, much can be learned from a careful examination of the figurines in the Study Collection that concern relative scale, coloring and gilding, molding, handmodeling and retouch, aesthetic and technical choices, and especially the expressive qualities that are inherent in a plastic medium such as clay.
- 7 An excellent example of this can be seen in several sections of a large, curved, terracotta relief believed to belong to a Greek funnel vase and said to have been made at Canosa in Apulia in the late 3rd or early 2nd century B.C.E (fig. 5).¹ These relief surfaces are completely obscured by a powerfully-modeled and complex battle scene comprising warriors on horseback who trample the fallen enemy. Both warriors and horses were handmodeled in-the-round and then attached to the walls of the vase so that they appear to twist and writhe, vigorously projecting outward into space, as they advance around the vase. The dynamism of the modeling and the poses tends to obscure the somewhat clumsy treatment of the anatomy of both riders and horses, as well as the hastily incised detail, both of which can be seen as hallmarks of a provincial product. It is obvious that viewing these reliefs first-hand, rather than in the on-line catalogue of the museum, enables one to appreciate the particular character of this form of coroplastic expression.

Fig. 5. Funnel vase, from Canosa, Rogers Fund, 1912, MMA 12.236.4.



The author.

- 8 While most of the vitrines in the Study Collection that contain figurative terracottas reflect a typological and chronological mix, one wall case in particular is dedicated to coroplastic material from Taranto of the 5th and early 4th centuries B.C.E (fig. 6). This presents to the viewer a sufficient enough number of stylistically similar fragments of figurines that a good understanding of the characteristic sculptural aesthetic of Taranto and its immediate vicinity as it was expressed by coroplasts can be appreciated. The range of types, all fragmentary, includes Zeus, banqueters, horsemen, kourotrophoi, and assorted male and female heads. The relative sizes of the figurines that these fragments represent, as well as the diversity of embellishment that is a typical feature of the Tarantine coroplastic expression, can still be examined, even though nothing is known of the exact context from which these fragments were brought to light.

Fig. 6. Wall case with classical terracottas from Taranto.



The author.

- 9 It is obvious that a visit to the Greek and Roman Study Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art should certainly be on the list of any researcher of Greek coroplastic material visiting New York City. Photography is permitted in the gallery, but make sure to bring a polarizing filter to control the glare on the glass of the vitrines. The mix of tungsten and natural light will be problematic for digital photography, and the scores of shadows that are created by the crowded figurines on successive glass shelves is difficult to overcome. However, the student or scholar wishing to use any object in the museum's collection for scholarly, non-commercial purposes may download high-resolution files directly from the museum's website free of charge.
<http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online>
- 10 In any case, when visiting the Greek and Roman Study Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art enjoy the treat of having an almost total immersion in coroplastic expression, a unique experience for most museum-goers in the United States.
<http://www.metmuseum.org/visit/museum-map>

ENDNOTES

1. Rogers Fund, 1912, 24.5 x 30.8cm. MMA 12.236.4

ABSTRACTS

The Study Collection at the Metropolitan Museum of Art includes over 200 figurative terracottas. Committed to the accessibility of its collections to a wider audience, The Metropolitan Museum of Art has nearly emptied its storerooms of portable antiquities and set these objects on public display in a dedicated gallery. Although little information on these terracottas, vases, minor sculptures, and coins is provided in this gallery, the lack of this information does not particularly hinder the ability to engage with these objects for study purposes that then can provide the foundation for further research.

AUTHOR

JAIMEE UHLENBROCK

State University of New York, New Paltz
uhlenbrj@hawkmail.newpaltz.edu